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Grappling with the “real politics” of systemic corruption: Theoretical debates versus ‘real world’ functions

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Abstract

A growing body of research argues that anticorruption efforts fail because of a flawed theoretical foundation, where collective action theory is said to be a better lens for understanding corruption than the dominant principal-agent theory. We unpack this critique and advance several new arguments. First, the application of collective action theory to the issue of corruption has been, thus far, incomplete. Second, a collective action theory-based approach to corruption is in fact complementary to a principal-agent approach, rather than contradictory as is claimed. Third, applications of both theories have failed to recognize that corruption persists because it functions to provide solutions to problems. We conclude by arguing that anticorruption effectiveness is difficult to achieve because it requires insights from all three perspectives—principal-agent theory, collective action theory, and corruption as serving functions—which allows us to better understand how to harness the political will needed to fight corruption.

Key words: Corruption, anticorruption, collective action, principal-agent, political will

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, the effort to control corruption in the developing world has grown seemingly exponentially; it has attracted support from all major aid agencies and has inspired hundreds of reform projects, action plans, anti-corruption agencies and a growing class of in-demand experts. There are international anti-corruption conferences, the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and even, in May 2016, a Global Summit Against Corruption. Depending on the source consulted, it has drawn anywhere from hundreds of millions to billions of dollars in investment (Sampson 2010, Michael 2004; Michael and Bowser 2009; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006), leading to what has been called the birth of an ‘anti-corruption industry’ (Sampson 2010; Michael 2004; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). Despite this investment, there seem to be few successful cases where countries have significantly reduced corruption in this time period (Johnsøn, Taxell & Zaum 2012: 42). In short, most systemically corrupt countries are considered to be just as corrupt now as they were before anti-corruption interventions were rolled out (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; Persson, Rothstein & Teorell 2013; Hough 2013).

For a growing number of authors the wide-scale failure of anti-corruption programming lies in the inappropriate theoretical foundations that underscore its design. Anti-corruption programming is overwhelmingly influenced by principal-agent theory. The application of principal-agent theory depicts corruption as occurring when public officials who have discretion over the provision of public services lack accountability. This application emphasizes the rational choices that take place in individual incidents of corruption, implicitly assuming that corruption is ‘solvable’ with policies that can alter these individual calculations. Recently, critics have argued that this assumption is flawed, especially in systemically corrupt contexts, where corruption is best

understood to be a collective action problem instead (Bauhr & Nasiritousi 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi 2011; Persson, Rothstein & Teorell 2013; Rothstein 2011; Marquette, Pavarala & Malik 2014; Rothstein & Teorell, 2015; Teorell & Rothstein, 2015; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Rothstein & Varraich, 2017). From this critical perspective, it is argued that the application of principal-agent theory mistakenly assumes that there will be ‘principled principals’ in civil society and in positions of power to actively oppose corruption and enforce anti-corruption reforms. Instead, for these authors, systemic corruption persists because corruption is widely perceived to be the norm in such contexts, and individuals gain little from abstaining from or resisting corruption if they cannot trust that others will do the same. The roots of this insight are attributed to collective action theory.

In this paper, we advance four new arguments. In the next section, we argue that the application of collective action theory, thus far, to the issue of corruption has been both incomplete and narrow. In addition to the insight that trust and perceptions of how others act influence decisions regarding whether to engage in or to resist corruption, a rich collective action theory literature also highlights the potential importance of a host of other factors, like the salience of the good for the group and the feasibility of members monitoring each other in contributing towards the collective good.

Second, we make clear that, despite how they are portrayed elsewhere, the insights for anticorruption that collective action theory provides are complementary to those provided by a principal-agent theory approach. Research has shown that principal-agent problems exist alongside and within collective action problems, and the same factors that reduce the chances of a principal-agent problem arising can also encourage collective action, more generally. This is particularly important, given the growing development policy interest in translating this research

into practical policy recommendations.¹

Perhaps more importantly, in the fourth section, we argue that, as they have so far been applied to the issue of corruption, both principal-agent theory and collective action theory share in common a ‘blind spot’. Both theoretical applications have been used so far to frame corruption only as a ‘problem,’ which fails to recognize that corruption functions to provide solutions to the everyday problems people face.

Finally, we conclude by making it clear that each perspective has something to add to our understanding of the scope and scale of challenges that anticorruption efforts face, and that leaving one perspective out hollows this understanding. Systemic corruption is difficult to deal with not only because monitoring and sanctioning corrupt behavior presents technical challenges (principal-agent theory), or that when corruption is perceived to be ‘normal’ few may be willing to abstain from participating in corrupt exchanges or may be reluctant to take the first step to enforce anticorruption reforms (collective-action theory), but also because corruption is the means through which many solve real problems that have deep social, structural, economic and political roots.

2. Principal-agent versus collection action approaches to corruption: two sides of the same coin?

¹ See, for example, studies commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (Rao 2013; Rocha Menocal et al 2014), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Mungui-Pippidi 2011); and several papers by the World Bank (e.g., Gauri, Woolcock & Desai 2011; Keefer 2012; WBI 2008).

Ugur and Dasgupta (2011) demonstrate the predominance of principal-agent theory in corruption research through a meta-analysis of 115 studies looking at corruption's impact on economic growth. They found that all studies considered 'adhered to an explicitly-stated principal-agent approach to corruption, or their account was closely related to that approach' (2011: 43). It is no wonder then that, as Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013) argue, the design of most anti-corruption programs reflects a principal-agent understanding of corruption, rather than any other alternative view (see also Mungiu-Pippidi, 2011: 7).

Corruption is often described to exist in society as a *double* principal-agent problem. In the first instance, a political leader or higher ranked bureaucrat is the principal and lower ranked state bureaucrats, the agents. Lacking the ability to perfectly monitor their actions, the principal is unable to detect when rationally minded bureaucrats use their discretion over resources to extract rents. The second principal-agent problem occurs when public officials (bureaucrats or politicians) are conceptualized to be the 'agents' and the public, more generally, as the 'principal.' A public official is able to abuse their office and discretion over public services to secure private rents from members of the public, and the public is unable to perfectly monitor or hold public officials accountable (Ugur & Dasgupta 2011; Bardhan 1997; Klitgaard 1988; Rose-Ackerman 1978).

In either case, applications of principal-agent theory to corruption have emphasized the rational choices of individuals that take place in discrete incidences of corruption. This focus implies that corruption is 'solvable' with policies that alter the degree to which principals are able to monitor and sanction their agents and the level of discretion given to agents and their individual incentive calculations. Consequently, anti-corruption interventions, guided by principal-agent models, have focused on reducing the discretion of civil servants, increasing monitoring mechanisms, promoting transparency in government, supporting anti-corruption civil society

groups to serve as watchdogs, and strengthening sanctions on those who engage in corruption, so as to better align the incentives of potential ‘agents’ with those of their respective ‘principals’.

However, efforts to map evidence on what works in anticorruption have found that ‘[o]nly in the case of [public financial management (PFM)] does the evidence clearly suggest that such measures reduce corruption’ (Johnsøn, Taxell & Zaum 2012: 42). In terms of public sector reforms (other than PFM), oversight institutions, civil society, budget support, donors’ own systems and multilateral agreements, all interventions in keeping with the principal-agent model, the evidence of their efficacy is weak or fair at best. One answer given to the question of why the record of anti-corruption interventions has been so poor is that anti-corruption interventions are based on a theoretical misunderstanding of the nature of corruption; in other words, the application of principal-agent theory to the issue of corruption has fallen short in providing viable anti-corruption solutions because it is the wrong theory.

A different explanation found in the principal-agent theory corruption literature is that the fault instead rests with the political or bureaucratic leaders who have been unwilling to fully implement necessary reforms (e.g., Kpundeh 1998; Brinkerhoff 2000). However, this treats political will as an exogenous factor to the design of what should theoretically be effective anticorruption interventions. In doing so, most interventions inspired by principal-agent theory have mistakenly taken for granted that principals have the ‘will’ to serve the functions of monitoring and holding agents to account.

Some authors (e.g., Persson, Rothstein & Teorell 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2011; Bauhr & Nasiritousi 2011; Rothstein 2011; Rothstein & Teorell, 2015; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Rothstein & Varraich, 2017) have recently criticized the principal-agent view within anti-corruption policy, as well as governance more generally (Booth & Cammack 2013), on the grounds that corruption

should instead be viewed as a problem of collective action, especially in contexts of systemic corruption. For example, Mungui-Pippidi (2011: xiv) claims that ‘what is presented in most anticorruption literature as a principal-agent problem is in fact a collective action problem.’ From this perspective, viewing corruption as a principal-agent problem ‘mischaracterizes’ the issue of corruption completely (see Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013, for this particular turn of phrase).

A classic collective action problem occurs when members of a group fail to work towards the production of a public good or a common pool resource (Olson, 1965). Because both types of these goods are non-excludable, people who do not contribute towards their production can still benefit from them. Whenever a user cannot be excluded from enjoying the benefits of collective action, the individual incentive to contribute towards the production of that collective benefit is reduced. When some free ride and others do not, the collective benefit is not provided to its fullest potential.

What impacts people’s perceived interests and calculations to contribute towards the common good has been the subject of dozens of studies. One potentially important factor that has been highlighted is the influential role that perceptions of how other group members are likely to act and whether or not members can be trusted (see Seabright, 1993; Ostrom, 1990; Elster, 1985, for examples). It is from this insight that the authors cited above root their application of collective action theory to the conceptualization of corruption. The following, from Teorell and Rothstein (2015: 220) typifies the argument made: “[corruption] persists because most of the agents perceive that most other agents in their situation take part in corrupt exchanges and practices. This implies that even for an ‘honest principal’, it makes little sense to refuse to take part in corrupt practices if the perception is that corruption is the ‘standard operating procedure’” (see also Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013: 456-457; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015:64; Rothstein & Teorell, 2015: 241). Viewing

corruption in this way makes an important contribution to the field by highlighting the collective, rather than individual, nature of corruption and the very difficult challenge that anti-corruption efforts face in changing levels of distrust in society and norms that reinforce persistent patterns of systemic corruption.²

However, intra-group trust is certainly not the only factor that has been shown to influence collective action, and so an emphasis on this one variable is a very narrow application of ‘collective action theory’ to anticorruption. Agrawal (2002) listed more than thirty factors that scholars have identified as likely to affect whether a group will be able to overcome a potential collective action problem. Drawing from Ostrom’s (2010) list of variables most frequently cited in the collective action theory literature (see also Ostrom 1998, 2007), these include, for example: group size, repeated interaction, trust/good reputation, group interdependence, heuristics/norms, monitoring/transparency, long time horizons and the salience of the collective good.

The potential importance of any one of these variables is acknowledged to be completely contextual in the broader collective action theory literature (see Ostrom, 2010: 164, for example).

² To the best of our knowledge, it has not been established what actual collective good corruption is precluding or reducing, nor how, through the lens of collective action theory, participating in corruption should be framed. Ostensibly, corruption is the manifestation of free riding, as it undermines collective action. The group’s collective benefit can be conceptualized in abstract terms, as a good quality of government (e.g. Rothstein 2011). In a more concrete sense, corruption can lead to the bankrupting of the state or at least reduce its ability to provide public services effectively and efficiently.

Moreover, it is also clear that any one of the potential influences on collective action is most certainly impacted by the influence of others. This means that the variables' interactive effects likely matter and also that their own causal relationships to each other matter as well. For instance, with regard to trust/reputation, trusting that people will abstain from corruption is influenced by the heuristics people have formed about how others will behave in society, which are in turn likely heavily shaped by one's repeated interactions with others.

Transparency International's Integrity Pacts have been described as an archetypal example of a collective action theory inspired anticorruption approach (WBI, 2010). They involve written agreements between government and private bidders to refrain from bribery and collusion during the process of procurement bidding and a monitoring system that provides for independent oversight from civil society over the public contracting process (Transparency International, 2009). In bringing all actors together to make a formal agreement, such exercises acknowledge that the most precarious risks for corruption often lie in collective dynamics. Consistent with the expectations set out by the literature on the application of collective action theory to the issue of corruption, successful Integrity Pacts are built on trust within the group of actors involved (Transparency International, 2009). However, as the much wider collective action theory literature suggests, the success of an Integrity Pact is often challenged when other factors are also not in place, such as transparency of information and the ability of actors to monitor each other throughout the process of procurement bidding; continuity of actors with time horizons long enough to last the process of procurement (i.e. low public service turnover); and the political will of the government to be involved at all (Transparency International, 2009).

The challenges facing this 'real world' example suggest a need for more critical reflection on the limits of the current treatment of collective action theory in corruption/governance circles,

which may leave readers with the sense that collective action tends to equal inclusive community engagement, working with civil society to build trust in society in order to challenge the sorts of norms that allow corrupt behavior to persist and so on. A collective action theory approach to anti-corruption programming may involve these things, but other factors that have proven important for collective action in the much broader collective-action theory literature illustrate that successful collective action may also be exclusionary and hierarchical. After all, in the wider literature on collective action theory, having a small group size is often seen as beneficial to finding a resolution to a collective action problem, and collective action problems are thought to arise when there is no clear and legitimate leadership that can regulate public or common goods.

3. Throwing the theoretical baby out with the bathwater?

Those that criticize the principal-agent theory inspired approach to corruption and think that collective action theory brings a fresh insight emphasize how these two approaches differ. For instance Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013: 450) tell us: ‘as a collective action problem, systemic corruption reveals radically different characteristics than predicted by principal-agent theory’. As such, they argue that it also demands ‘radically different solutions’. On two issues are these theories said to differ. Firstly, principal-agent theory, from this critical perspective, mistakenly assumes that there will always be ‘principled principals’ who are willing to hold officials accountable for engaging in corruption; as discussed earlier, this is rightly not assumed by those that have applied collective action theory to the issue of corruption. Secondly, unlike principal-agent theory, the application of collective action theory is able to make sense of the fact that in an environment where everyone is believed to be engaging in corruption, there are few incentives for individuals to abstain.

There are some fundamental flaws with this analysis, however. First, this application of principal-agent theory represents a misinterpretation of principal-agent theory (proper) that is rife within the policy-oriented academic literature on corruption. In the wider research on principal-agent theory principals are motivated not by principles but by interests. So, principal-agent theory (proper) does not assume that (a) either the principal or the agent is principled (but does assume they have interests), or (b) the principal is willing to hold the agent accountable for not acting in their own interests. Put differently, it is not at all inconsistent with principal-agent theory to suggest that where principals do not have a stake in the intended outcome they will not be willing to play this role.

Second, the logics underscoring collective action theory (proper) and principal-agent theory (proper) are not at all mutually exclusive. The wider literatures on both theories show that principal-agent problems exist within collective-action problems and vice versa (e.g., Booth and Cammack 2013: 15). Their logical overlaps are clear when applied to the issue of corruption, as well. Both theoretical lenses describe the same individual calculations made when deciding whether or not to engage in corruption. Both theories assume individual rationality and recognize that the decision to engage in corruption is shaped by the perceived likelihood that one will not be held accountable for doing so. To apply collective action theory (proper) to corruption, and assuming that corruption is ‘free-riding’, the decision to engage in corruption is cast as being motivated by the free-rider’s knowledge that they will not lose their beneficiary status to a good (i.e. be held accountable) because they chose to engage in corruption. Similarly, in principal-agent theoretic terms, the logic behind an agent choosing to engage in corruption is understood to be a function of the agent’s perception that it is unlikely that the principal can hold them to account for doing so.

A logical conclusion from both of these theories is actually that more effective monitoring and sanctioning can increase accountability and reduce corruption. Those that criticize the principal-agent approach to corruption downplay this. Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013), for example, argue that the principal-agent framework has led anti-corruption strategies down the wrong path by implying that anti-corruption reforms should focus on reducing the discretion of civil servants, increasing monitoring mechanisms and strengthening sanctions on those that engage in corruption (see also Rothstein & Teorell, 2015). These remedies are indeed tightly linked to the principal-agent theory vision of corruption; the inability of the principal to perfectly monitor and punish (or hold accountable) the agent's engagement in corruption is at the heart of a corrupt principal-agent problem. It follows from the application of principal-agent theory that when the principal is better able to monitor or sanction the agent, the incentive to engage in corruption will be reduced. Arguably, however, similar conclusions could be drawn from a collective action theory approach to anticorruption. As the wider collective action theory literature illustrates, when group members' actions are more easily and readily monitored, the incentive to engage in free-ridership becomes reduced (see, for example, Agrawal & Goyal, 2001; Ostrom 1990).

In highlighting the ways in which the two theories overlap in their conceptualization of corruption, we do not mean to downplay the individual contributions of how either theory has thus far been applied to the problem. Rather, we suggest that each theoretical application has added to the understanding of why corruption can be so difficult to control. Thus, for us, it is important not to try to discard the usefulness of a principal-agent theory approach to anticorruption *carte blanche*. Instead, it should be acknowledged that given the similarities in the two theories, a collective action theory inspired approach to anticorruption will necessarily retain elements that are consistent with a principal-agent theory inspired approach to anticorruption. The distinction

between the two theoretical approaches will be difficult to make in practice.

One way forward is to focus on what types of specific collective action problems influential principals face in deciding which anti-corruption reforms to pursue, as well as the challenges those principals face in implementation via their organizational agents. For example, in politicized bureaucracies recruitment patterns are usually rooted in clientelistic networking rather than meritocracy. There are a host of reasons why principals overseeing recruitment in a bureaucracy may not want to try to discipline reforms. They may believe that other people in similar positions are allowing un-meritocratic hiring, and therefore find some encouragement to do the same because ‘everyone else is doing it’. Also, achieving a meritocratic bureaucracy may not be a particularly salient goal for them; as their own position is perceived to be subject to the political winds changing, they may not have a particularly long time horizon in their office. This will limit willingness to risk losing personal benefits from the status quo and/or exert energy to change things. The wider politicized organizational and even societal heuristics and norms may encourage them to allow this pattern of recruitment to continue. These issues, which tend to be attributed to collective action theory more so than principal-agent theory (Agrawal, 2002), address why some political will might be absent to implement meritocracy based reforms, but it is equally important to note that principals within the bureaucracy may also face problems enforcing meritocratic recruitment patterns that are usually cast as archetypical ‘principal-agent problems’, such as not being able to monitor closely enough the specific recruitment procedures their agents are following (though as mentioned before, monitoring is also recognized as important for collective action). Those having the ‘political will’ to reform would still find this limitation in their capacity to manage their agents a significant challenge to overcome before achieving a meritocratic bureaucracy.

Naidoo (2013) makes a similar point by arguing that in several instances within and across South African state institutions, anticorruption efforts confronted both principal-agent and collective action theory type challenges. For example, Naidoo describes that no fewer than ten government agencies in South Africa were given a role in anti-corruption, which introduced challenges around coordinating efforts (a quintessential collective action issue) as well as the delineation of responsibility within and across the agencies (arguably both challenges that are consistent with collective action theory and principal-agent theory) (2013: 533).

4. The problem with viewing corruption as only a ‘problem’

‘In other policy areas...there are groups who are for or against. The case of corruption, in contrast, only attracts opponents’ (de Sousa et al 2008: 1)

We believe that there is at least one more similarity between how principal-agent and collective action theories have been applied in anticorruption, which is a shared crucial blind spot: as both have thus far been applied, they frame corruption as only a ‘problem.’ Doing so has failed to recognize that corruption and patron-client networks persist because they function in providing solutions to problems. In acknowledging the functions that corruption serves, confronting a ‘lack of political will’ takes on a new light. It becomes more than a mere matter of there being no one willing or able to make the first step towards reducing corruption, but instead opens up the analytical possibility that the present state of affairs serves purposes that seem (and sometimes are) defensible to those involved. To fully get to grips with the functions that corruption and/or patron client relationships serve, we must start by better understanding the ‘real’ ideas and values behind

these relationships.³

The idea that corruption persists because it fulfils political, social and economic functions is one with a long historical pedigree, certainly longer than much contemporary corruption/anticorruption research acknowledges. Navot (2014: 359), for example, writes of a ‘lost epoch’ of research on political corruption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which he argues attempted ‘to move away from understanding political corruption in purely moralistic terms’. Arguably, the notion peaked in popularity a half a century ago, as it was a theme prominent in many works within the development of modernization theory; from the 1950s until the early 1970s, this dominant academic discourse on corruption maintained a ‘functionalist approach’, which essentially argued that corruption functions in positive ways and as a result facilitates both political and economic development (Osrecki, 2017).

Huntington (1968: 64) sums up the gist of the sentiment, ‘corruption provides immediate, specific, and concrete benefits to groups which might otherwise be thoroughly alienated from society. Corruption may thus be functional to the maintenance of a political system in the same way that reform is.’ The functionalist approach toward corruption can also be found in several ‘classic’ works on corruption (e.g., Leff [1964]; Leys [1965]; McKittrick [1957]; McMullan [1961]; Nye [1967]; Scott [1969]; Smelser [1971]; Waterbury [1973]; Waterbury [1976]; Heidenheimer, Johnston and LeVine [1989]). Corruption for these authors is both a product of modernization, as well as a contributor towards it.

³ Navot’s definition of ‘real politics’ is useful here: ‘actual political processes, local norms, public discussions, self-interpretation of agents, and public opinion’ (2015: 1-2).

For Huntington (1968) corruption occurs because economic development creates new industrial and commercial elites that have to use corruption to influence the political system, which, in an early modernizing society, especially, is still likely dominated by the groups that have traditionally inhabited the formal political space. With this perspective in mind, corruption is then seen as a tool of informal participation, which - if it displaces the call for violent political uprisings - can encourage the stability of the political system. Osrecki (2017:8) summarizes Huntington's argument that corruption was necessary to the development of stable political parties in the West: 'Both in Britain and the USA, public funds were used to build up the most stable parties and the most stable political systems in the modern world by being able to offer government patronage to members.' Merton (1968) argued that corruption was also a way to achieve social mobility, as it afforded newcomers to development a way of accumulating private wealth. Finally, for Leff (1964), Huntington (1968) and Leys (1965) corruption persists because it is also used to circumvent inefficient bureaucratic red-tape, and as such may on the whole be economically beneficial, as such bureaucratic hoops can impede investment (the famous, 'grease the wheels' hypothesis).

Literature highlighting corruption's functionality fell somewhat out of fashion after the late 1970s, when the mainstream study of corruption became dominated by economists (Osrecki, 2017; Williams, 1999; Marquette, 1999), though research emphasising the functionality of corruption can be found in many anthropological accounts before, throughout, and after the 1990s (see Torsello & Venard, 2016 for a recent critical review). Arguably, the theme of corruption serving vital functions has seen a resurgence in the last two decades.

Khan (2004; 2006), for example, is known for arguing that corruption persists because it works for those involved. He and others (e.g., Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Englebert, 2000) have

argued that political leaders, especially in developing countries, maintain political stabilization out of necessity through ‘off-budget’ redistribution measures and through patron-client networks—transferring resources to powerful clients in exchange for political support. Corruption is a necessary political mechanism in developing countries, it is argued, because unlike their colleagues in advanced capitalist countries, who usually maintain political stabilization through legal fiscal budgetary transfers, developing country leaders are restricted in their ability to do the same. Given the prevalence of subsistence farming and consequentially, the relative low amount of taxable income, fiscal space in the budget available to political leaders in most developing countries for political redistribution is usually very limited (Khan, 2004; 2006; Stotsky & Wolde Mariam, 1997; Ghura, 1998; Herbst, 2000). The argument goes that political leaders in developing countries must therefore rely on targeted, strategic transfers that are necessarily off of the books. To this effect, Chabal and Daloz (1999: 103-104) write, ‘given that the state in Africa is not, and will not in the foreseeable future be in a position to garner the resources needed for an egalitarian distribution of resources according to social needs, (neo)patrimonialism continues to suit both patrons and clients.’ While this argument has been advanced with the developing world in mind, political corruption persists everywhere because it functions to give (largely) elites the ability to influence the political landscape.

The ‘corruption as fulfilling functions’ lens helps to also make sense of the persistence of systemically persistent low-level bureaucratic corruption, which is the type of corruption that ordinary people are most likely to confront (Rose and Peiffer 2015). Especially when faced with patchy and unevenly provided state services, citizens necessarily rely on corruption to gain access to needed services. Walton (2013: 187) finds this in Papua New Guinea, and concludes that ‘in weak states such as PNG, some types of corruption can offer social protection mechanisms for

those excluded from state benefits.’ A similar point is made by Hickey and du Toit (2013: 144), who observe that, in the form of election giveaways particularly, patronage can work to reduce poverty by offering the very poor some resource security. Of course, it might be the case that without the loss of state resources to corruption, there would *eventually* be improved service delivery; to those individuals who need to access them today – for themselves or their family – that is scant consolation.

Patron-client relationships and corruption can also serve many social functions. For example, Gauri, Woolcock and Desai (2011: 27) observe that in Honduras, a history of violent conflict has shaped the way in which patron-client relations are viewed; rather than simply understood as a way in which to (corruptly) access public funds, they are understood to provide security and safety in a highly violent and unstable environment. Moreover, participating in a network of patron-client relationships can reinforce social bonds and societal norms that are universally valued like the notion that people in powerful positions should give back and shared feelings of mutual obligation. In Papua New Guinea, Walton (2013) observes that corruption has been considered important for maintaining traditional practices, like gift giving. As such, even in societies where the popular discourse expresses intense frustration with the prevalence of corruption, many corrupt acts are considered moral and/or legitimate within the specific context and circumstances that they occur (Smith, 2007; Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Walton, 2013). Capturing this sentiment in his work on post-colonial India, Gupta (1995: 397) observed, ‘a highly placed official who fails to help a close relative or fellow villager obtain a government position is often roundly criticised by people for not fulfilling his obligations to his kinsmen and village brothers’. Empirical studies such as these suggest that we have barely begun to scratch the surface of

understanding corruption in different contextual settings and how this may or may not offer explanations for its persistence.

5. The challenges for anticorruption

One message from this analysis, and especially the ‘corruption as a collective action problem perspective,’ is that an effective response to fight corruption requires the coordinated actions of several actors working together. As Mungiu-Pippidi writes of tackling corruption, ‘no country can change without domestic collective action.’ (2011:xv). This resonates well with observations made by others that episodes of effective anticorruption action have hinged upon the presence of an anticorruption reform coalition (Johnston and Kpundeh, 2002; Klitgaard and Baser, 1998; Chene, 2011). Reform coalitions are coalitions of usually elite actors within and across the state, oftentimes with actors from the private sector and civil society that share in common overlapping goals (Peiffer, 2012). Johnston and Kpundeh (2002: 3) argue that anticorruption reform coalitions represent the ‘best strategy we have for creating a visible, legitimate [anticorruption] reform movement quickly’. Reform coalitions are said to be particularly useful for their potential to moderate the costs and risks for ‘those that take the first steps against corruption in the face of both popular apathy and entrenched opposition from corruption interests’ (Johnston and Kpundeh, 2002: 3); this is the very concern of those advocating a collective action theory-inspired understanding of the problem of corruption.

The point made is not controversial: if transformational change is to occur in systemically corrupt countries, it will not rely on the action of one or a few individual elites or disparate and small citizen groups speaking out against pervasive patterns of corruption. Even if they had the

motivation to ‘stick their necks out’, a collective and coordinated effort will be required. In accepting this, the collective action problem that should draw our attention is not just, or necessarily, one of systemic corruption, but instead that of supporting a true anticorruption reform coalition with enough power to shake up powerful vested interests and enough capacity to coordinate efforts and make a difference.⁴

Those working within the applied principal-agent theory inspired anticorruption paradigm often blame the failure of an intervention on a lack of ‘political will’ to implement what is otherwise perceived to be a good technical solution to the problem of corruption (e.g., Kpundeh 1998). By stopping there, however, ‘political will’ is treated as a black box, exogenous to the design of an effective anticorruption intervention. The application of collective action theory has helped to partially unpack this black box; from this perspective, a leader will lack the ‘political will’ to make the first move to implement anticorruption reforms because they cannot trust that others will follow suit. The risk is that any first move is both wasted and not rewarded, or even that it could be punished. To assess the chances of a reform coalition arising, we must unpack the black box of political will even further. Recognizing that corruption functions to ‘solve’ the political problems of maintaining stability, providing access to state services and serving as a

⁴ Hindess (2008:22,25) offers an important caveat here though. He argues that anticorruption programs looking at collective action interventions tend to target areas that are ‘politically unproblematic’, which ‘shift the focus away from the issue of dealing with bad individuals and/or bad practices to the very different issue of societal reform – in this case of changing the social context in which such individuals and/or practices are able to flourish’. Such a focus, he argues, means that vested interests and their power are often left unchallenged.

mechanism for political redistribution in a challenging environment, does this. It helps to make sense of why a coalition of ‘principled principals’ is often absent. The political will needed to enforce anticorruption reform is often missing, perhaps because corruption is (sometimes necessarily) relied upon to solve problems.

This acknowledgement makes the political and social dynamics that give rise to corruption more visible. Political factors are ever-present in shaping the interests and incentives of leaders and citizens to engage in meaningful anticorruption reform. Rather than simply being seen as venal and extractive, it also follows that patron-client relationships should be examined for what purposes they serve and what they mean for those involved, whether that be a source of social bonding, a sense of safety and/or how they might work to reinforce other desirable societal norms like gift giving and reciprocity. This is not a call to romanticize those relationships, but instead to point out that—as researchers, practitioners and policy-makers—we often willfully misunderstand them in the drive to condemn corruption. As Roll (2014: 5) argues in his work on ‘pockets of effectiveness’ in the public sector in developing countries, ‘Instead of thinking about what the world should look like it is perhaps better to analyze it as it is in particular places and under specific conditions, paying attention to the underlying political dimension, and then build on that.’

Through an explicitly political lens we may also start to understand why certain principal-agent or collective action problems exist in anticorruption in the first place. Coordination issues, for instance, do not always arise spontaneously, as merely a function of the multitude of actors involved. Instead, for political reasons, collective action problems can be carefully crafted, maintained or harnessed, as a way of undermining the effectiveness of institutions meant to challenge corruption. Revisiting Naidoo’s (2013) examination of anticorruption in South Africa, he forcefully argues that due to political impulses, South Africa’s ineffective multiagency

approach to anticorruption, which suffered heavily from coordination issues, was maintained. To this effect, Naidoo writes (2013: 538), ‘more overt displays of intra-party political motives were shown to have thwarted efforts to both institutionalize robust and specialist anticorruption capacity within the state, as well as undermine the effectiveness of South Africa’s existing multiagency framework’.

The three lenses (principal-agent, collective action, and corruption serving functions) represent different but overlapping challenges that anticorruption campaigners face in promoting effective interventions. Technically speaking, effective anticorruption interventions must be designed to take into account potential principal-agent problems that may harvest individualized incentives to engage in corruption, as well as coordination and other collective action theoretical issues that might arise in trying to implement an intervention. Conversely, implementation, or rather the reluctance to implement a reform, is not only a potential collective action issue—no one wanting to make the first step—but also is likely to find its roots in the perceived or actual functionality of corruption. In other words, changing peoples’ mentalities or perceptions of their colleagues or wider society’s behavior will not necessarily change the structural necessity for elites to use corruption as a mechanism to ensure political survival, for example, or for ordinary citizens to depend upon corrupt networks in order to access what services exist. In accepting the need to better understand this logic, especially in the case of systemically corrupt contexts, the combined challenges to control corruption admittedly become incredibly daunting.

Moreover, the will to implement a reform should be dealt with before time and energy is expended in designing a technically savvy intervention. This implies that the functionality of corruption must be understood and confronted head on. In McKittrick’s (1957: 508) words, ‘... it may be assumed that a reform government which offers nothing as a substitute for functions

performed by the [political] machine will find itself very shortly in a state of paralysis.’ Truly effective anticorruption efforts, therefore, may not even attempt to directly tackle corruption in the first place. Instead, the logical extension of our argument would imply that serious attempts to control corruption would have to start by trying to gain an understanding of what solutions corruption provides to those who engage in it, and then try to deal in the business of providing those solutions through other means. To draw on an earlier example, if we understand that corrupt patron-client networks in Honduras are defensible to many because of the sense of security and safety they provide in a highly violent environment (Gauri, Woolcock & Desai, 2011), serious efforts to control corruption must address the rule of law and security in that context, before or along with addressing individual incentives or other collective dynamics.

One interpretation of this, however, could be that reformers should focus on the root causes of corruption – e.g., poverty, weak political institutions, weak leadership – before attempting to tackle corruption directly. We admit that this is a logical sequentialist conclusion to draw from this analysis; however, this is not a call for reformers – internal or external – to do nothing. Instead we argue that doing nothing might be less harmful than *effectively* tackling corruption, if such attempts do not also address the underlying functions that corruption fulfils. In other words, if corruption is reduced, but the function it fulfils are not addressed, at best any reduction is likely to be temporary;⁵ at worst, the effect could be destabilizing (see also Johnston, 2010; Marquette, 2011).

⁵ McKittrick (1957: 24) describes the ‘shifts and transformations’ in corruption as being like shifts in energy; it can transform, but it cannot really disappear; an interesting – if somewhat depressing – analogy for anticorruption reformers.

Whether ineffective interventions are informed by principal-agent theory or by collective action theory, the result could be the same without tackling these functions head on.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how principal-agent theory and collective action theory explanations for the persistence of corruption are not necessarily competing but are instead usefully complementary. When conceptualizing corruption as a problem, the two theories can emphasize different sets of important dynamics. Principal-agent theory's take on corruption has been thought to primarily highlight the rational calculations made by individuals at discrete points in time in a specific type of hierarchical structure. While collective action theory has been so far used to point to the role intra-group trust can play in influencing individual decisions, it has more to contribute than just this insight. A collective action theory lens applied to corruption emphasizes the fact that the same individual decisions on whether or not to engage in corruption occur within a wider society, rather than in isolation of the behavior of others. Thus, monitoring, transparency and sanctioning—all variables that impact upon individual calculations of whether or not to engage in corruption—should also be weighed against the potential influence of group dynamics that may impact on the likelihood of free-riding. Collectively, the two theoretical approaches to corruption teach us that corruption persists because it is not only difficult to monitor and therefore difficult to prosecute, but also because, when it is systemically pervasive, people may lack the incentives to initiate either countermeasure.

When recognizing that corruption persists because it solves problems, the 'corrupt equilibrium' in countries with pervasive and systemic corruption is not just depicted as a social trap—maintained and reinforced by low levels of generalizable trust—but as a political one as

well. Together, all three of these lenses highlight the multifaceted challenges that anticorruption reformers face. They imply that effective anticorruption efforts need to not only target wide-scale perceptions that corruption is ‘normal’, but that corruption may possibly serve an important set of functions. Without recognizing this and engaging in the political dynamics that underscore corruption, anti-corruption efforts will continue to fail. Thus, anticorruption reformers should ask themselves, what functions does corruption serve as well as what obstacles exist to eradicating it? Arguably, without answering the first question, one cannot begin to adequately answer the second.

Most importantly our analysis suggests that effective anti-corruption efforts need to be tailored to context, which also means that investment must be made so that contextual factors are deeply understood, without prejudice. The context should drive efforts to tackle corruption, *not* the theory or model, regardless of whether interventions are inspired by principal-agent or collective action theories, or something else altogether. For example, monitoring, transparency and sanctioning measures may have big impact in contexts where incidences of corruption are relatively isolated; however, as Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013) and Bauhr and Grimes (2013) note, transparency efforts in an environment of systemic corruption could expose the fact that corruption is wildly pervasive, and this may compel people to engage more in corruption, rather than fight against it (see also Peiffer and Alvarez, 2016). Put differently, collective action theory-inspired anti-corruption approaches, such as values-based training or public awareness raising, should not be viewed as universally appropriate solutions to apply in all contexts. The lesson here is that we should learn from the history of (mis)applying principal-agent theory inspired models of anti-corruption to inappropriate contexts, where political will was missing to implement the fixes prescribed. Cracking open the black box of political will should be the next challenge for researchers and practitioners alike.

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